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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of talk, written language, and body language are critically important in primary classrooms. Although reading and writing may be regarded as cognitive activities, they are embedded in a social/cultural milieu, and the practice of mechanical decoding as a necessary precedent to real reading is not pedagogically sound. A whole class language session for 20 minutes each day can provide the teacher and students in Canada with a structure where exciting, meaningful language activities can stimulate students to move on to individual programs involving reading and writing. Early morning or early afternoon times, when kindergarten or grade one children need to be stimulated or calmed down, are best suited for whole class experiences. The session may start with the children sitting in a circle and sharing favorite rhymes, jingles, tongue twisters, and songs. Other activities include: show and tell, using a simple daily weather chart as a calendar, choral reading of new or old books, and shared writing. For grade two or three the procedure would be essentially the same except that activities would build on what has been learned at previous levels. Whole class language experiences engage students and teachers in meaningful, purposeful language interactions that are firmly grounded in the context of the child's world. (RS)

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WHOLE CLASS LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES IN PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

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Moira F. Juliebo

August 1991

Monograph No. 6

Abstract

The author argues that the inclusion of talk, written language, and body language are critically important in primary classrooms. Although reading and writing may be regarded as cognitive activities, they are embedded in a social/cultural milieu, and the practise of mechanical decoding as a necessary precedent to real reading is not pedagogically sound. Daily groups or social language sessions can establish the basis to stimulate students to move to individual reading and writing programs. The monograph describes six group language activities ranging from warm-ups to shared writing which engage children in purposeful language interactions grounded in the content of the child's world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Moira F. Juliebö is a professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta. Her professional background includes teaching extensively in elementary school grades. She has authored the Read-More series, a set of books for primary children. This series consists of twenty-four titles with more books forthcoming.

Whole Class Language Experiences

in Primary Classrooms

One feature which distinguishes humans from other animals is their ability to communicate with each other through a variety of signing systems which include talk, written language, and body language. These forms of communication are critically important in whole class language sessions in primary classrooms.

If we pause to consider what communication between two or more humans means, we essentially come up with the idea that:

a) one person wishes or intends to communicate with another or others.

b) the sending of some sort of message is the purpose.

c) the sender intends that the receiver understands the message and the context from which it comes.

d) the sender usually chooses the most appropriate medium to convey the information whether that be written, oral, visual, or a combination of any of these.

e) the receiver responds by showing understanding through a variety of modes.

In recent years we have seen a move towards individualizing language programs to meet the needs of a variety of students. While acknowledging the importance of such individualization geared to helping students realize their maximum potential, I would like to argue for the inclusion of some whole class languaging experiences where all students participate in communication despite individual levels of achievement. Surely this reflects life in the real world where many people, if they are to be successful communicators, will have to be able to communicate on many levels, in many modes and contexts with a variety of people. The skilled adult language user can successfully explain the same concept to a group of colleagues and to a group of children. Not only do they know how to change their talk, but they also desire to be understood.

Many children in Canada are exposed to a wide variety of print experiences before formal schooling begins, and just as they learned to talk through the desire to make meaning, many learn to be literate. Children do not wait to be taught but are active in their own world. Their literacy development just like talk does not develop in a systematic, sequential manner — although general trends can be observed (Doake, 1981). Although reading and writing are viewed as cognitive activities, they are embedded in a social/cultural milieu which dictates the form they take and the meaning inherent in them. These views are of course in direct conflict with traditional conventional views where such skills as mechanical decoding are considered to be necessary precedents for *real* reading. Readiness activities such as the following reflect such a view (Figure 1).

To make sense of the following excerpt from *Tea at Miss Cranston's*, (Blair, 1985), the reader not only has to know the meaning of certain words but also has to have

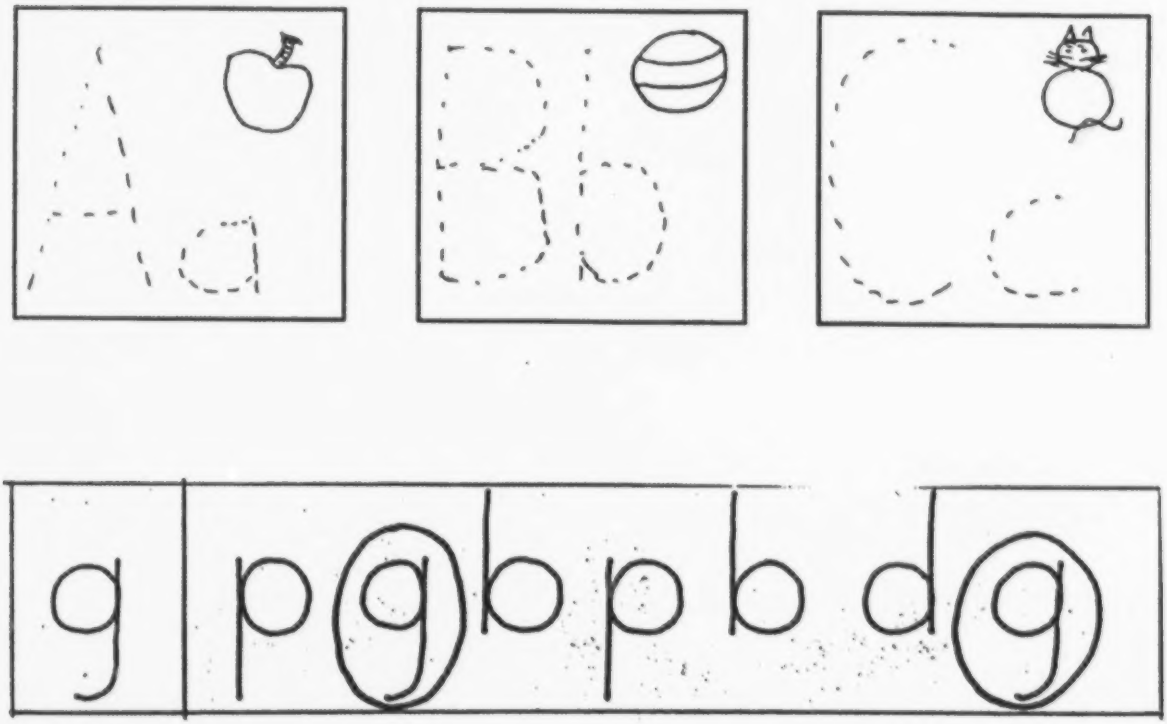

Figure 1: Readiness Activities

some understanding of the socio/cultural milieu where such an incident would take place at the turn of the century in Glasgow, Scotland.

> Weans who lived up closes in the days when they expected a clout for misbehaviour did not much notice whose hand it came from (p. 66).

The native Glaswegian immediately conjures up images of *closes* — the common entry area for blocks of flats or apartments. In these close living areas the "communal rearing of bairns" or weans (children) was a feature of community life and bad behavior was just as likely to be punished by a neighbor as a parent.

In our schools students come from a wide variety of *home* literacy backgrounds. In typical kindergartens some children hate books, others didn't know what they are, and yet others derive a great deal of pleasure from them. With such a variety of ability and experience in classrooms, how are we to organize for literacy instruction? Should we:

- Develop individual programs for each child?
- Teach the class as a whole without any regard for levels?
- Divide the children into ability groups?
- Use different structures for different purposes at different times?

As well as providing instruction targeted at individual needs, there is a strong case for whole class or social language sessions in elementary schools. A whole class language session for twenty minutes each day can provide the teacher and students with a structure where an enthusiastic, meaningful story can excite and stimulate the students to move on to individual programs involving reading and writing.

From experience I have found that early morning or early afternoon times, when kindergarten or grade one children need to be stimulated or calmed down, are best suited for whole class experiences. If you have a carpeted area, use it for the following activities or just create an open space. Many of these ideas are based on the work of Don Holdaway (1979) and Moira McKenzie (1985).

1. Warm-up

The session may start with the children sitting in a circle or crescent sharing favorite rhymes, jingles, tongue twisters, and songs. Over time a written collection of these can be made using a language experience approach where the children dictate and the teacher scribes, thus showing the connection between speech and written language. These chart poems can later be illustrated by the children as in the example below (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Rhyme

2. Show and Tell

Encourage the children to run this by themselves. Have a sign-up sheet for a maximum of five children and allow only two to three minutes for each presenter (Figure 3).

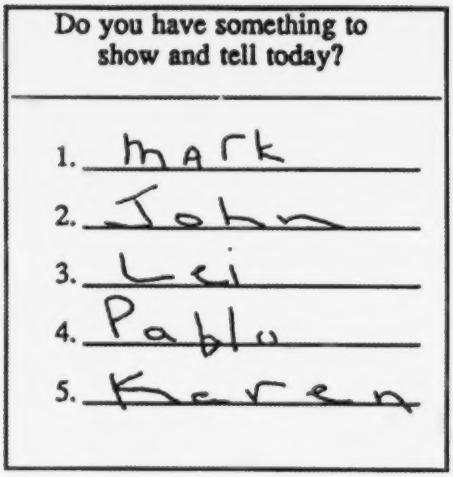

Figure 3: Show and Tell

Encourage children to read the print on objects shown. Following are some suggestions to vary the format of show and tell times:

1. Create a display of favorite cereal packets and graph the most popular ones.
2. Once a month have a toy day where the whole class displays one favorite toy.
3. Mystery Show and Tell where the class asks the presenter ten questions to guess what is in the bag. ie. Is it soft? Can you eat it?
4. Formal presentations using audio visual aids such as an overhead projector and sound tape.
5. A newsboard which features daily news.

3. Calendar - Weather

Instead of working with a regular calendar which often confuses primary aged children, a simple weather chart is more meaningful. Children volunteer to write the missing words on the weather chart. This chart is laminated and erasable pens are used. Students should be congratulated on attempts they make and given help when

necessary (Figure 4).

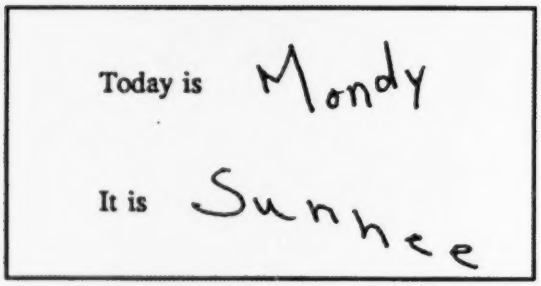

Figure 4: Calendar

4. Sharing an Old Favorite

The students choose a favorite big book and read it together while the teacher or one of the students tracks with a pointer. If they choose "I am a Firefighter," a language lesson could focus on any one of the following:

- The use of capital letters (My name is Joe Ryan and I am a firefighter.)
- Use context to predict words

  I drive this [fire truck] *words covered with 'post-it'*

- Some aspect of punctuation
- Monitoring predictions by checking:
  Does it sound right?
  Does it make sense? (*Look at the picture*)
  Does it look right?
- Replacing text words with words suggested by the children.
  Here is where we keep our gear. (*uniforms*)
- Arranging the text, which is written on cards, in the correct sequence.
- Dramatizing an event based on the book.
- (Getting dressed to go out on a call.)
- Choral reading
- Miming what you would like to be and the rest of the class guess. ie.
  Policeman directing traffic.

5. A New Text

A new book may arrive in a large parcel addressed to the class as follows

To the children of Grade I Alloway Elementary School On loan from Riverside School.

The new book is carefully unwrapped, placed on the easel, and read several times. The teacher leads the reading but the students at all levels of literacy development eagerly join in by

- mumble reading where they mumble the text fractionally behind the reader
- completion reading where the children complete a phrase or sentence when the teacher pauses
- echo reading where the children repeat the words immediately after the reader
- co-operative reading where the children read along with the teacher

The essence of this activity is the joyful participation by all of the children in the aesthetic experience of book sharing. This big book with smaller copies should then be placed in the library corner where paired reading can occur throughout the day. The books can also be tape-recorded using a vareity of voices of parents, brothers and sisters, and grandparents.

6. Shared Writing

On some days instead of a shared reading experience, shared writing can take place. The class in co-operation with the teacher constructs a written text for publication. As in shared reading the teacher thinks out loud and shares what she knows about the craft of writing with her students.

McKenzie (1985) suggests that shared writing may be constructed around the following:

- school events "Our Trip to the Provincial Museum"
- language play "Tongue Twisters"
- stories children know "The Three Billy Goats Gruff"
- songs, poems, games "One Little Duck Went Swimming"
- creating new stories "Goldilocks from the Bears' Point of View"
- extending songs
- relating to particular children "John's Surprise"
- social studies "When I was a Baby"
- extending known stories "The Terrible Terrible Very Bad DAy" "Are You My Mother?"

After a visit to a pond, the collection of samples, and several days of close study of what emerged as the mud settled, a grade one class wrote the following text (Figure 5).

Cover	Pond Creatures Written and Illustrated by grade one, Grovenor Elementary
Inside Cover	Dedicated to Dr. Juliebö Copyright © 1989.
P. 1	One day our grade one class went to explore a pond.
P. 2	We looked for a good place to catch all kinds of water creatures
P. 3	We got there in four cars. The drivers were Mr. French, Mrs. Juliebö, Mr. Hoffman and Mrs. Hoffman.
P. 4	We saw racing shrimps. We saw diving water beetles. We saw clinging snails.
P. 5	We saw singing birds. We saw swimming ducks. We saw climbing spiders.
P. 6	We caught them in nets and empty ice cream pails.
P. 7	We brought them back to school in three big orange pails.
P. 8	Mr. French poured the pond water into two aquariums and we observed the water creatures very carefully.

Figure 5: Pond Creatures

Through these exciting interactive language experiences, it is hoped that the children will be turned on to language and be ready and eager to tackle individual or group projects. For grade two or three the procedure would be essentially the same except that activities would build on what has been learned at previous levels. New stories could be introduced using a Directed Reading Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1980), where the teacher guides the children through an unfamiliar text. Student authors may also share their work. Whole class language experiences engage students and teachers in meaningful, purposeful, language interactions which are firmly grounded in the context of the child's world.

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